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C O N F I D E N T I A L HARARE 000317

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SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2015
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ZI](#)
SUBJECT: ARMS CACHE SUSPECTS CHARGED, LINKED TO
ASSASSINATION PLOT

REF: REFTEL: HARARE 303 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Eric T Schultz under Section 1.4
b/d

11. (SBU) The GOZ on March 11 charged eight suspects connected to last week's arms seizure in Mutare (reftel). The eight were charged under Public Order and Security Act (POSA) prohibitions against processing weapons to commit banditry, sabotage, or terrorism. Appearing in a Mutare court to be charged were Michael Peter Hitschmann, MDC MP for Mutare North Giles Mutsekwa, MDC provincial youth chairman Knowledge Nyamhuka, MDC activist Thando Sibanda, and four police officers who allegedly sold Hitschmann weapons. Although initially arrested, MDC provincial treasurer Brian James was not charged and was released on Sunday after police failed to link him to the weapons.

12. (SBU) The GOZ-controlled Sunday Mail highlighted supposed plans by the suspects to kill President Mugabe during the leader's birthday celebration in Mutare last month. The state-controlled Sunday Mirror added a new wrinkle by quoting an unidentified source who said that Taiwan was behind the plot in an effort to "neutralize Chinese influence in Southern Africa." The independent paper The Standard also recounted the government allegations, adding that the eight had supposedly planned to spill oil on the mountainous highway to Mutare to cause Mugabe's motorcade to crash, and to disrupt the birthday celebrations with tear gas. The Standard, however, gave equal coverage to defense statements that several of the suspects had been tortured and confessions coerced. The Standard also quoted defense lawyer Trust Manda who said that Hitschmann was a licensed arms deals, who in the course of normal business possessed large numbers of weapons.

13. (C) Manda told poloff on March 14 that Hitschmann was

providing information to police and that authorities were continuing to interrogate Nyamhuka and Sibanda with the threat of further beatings. (N.B. Manda does not represent the four police officers and could not comment on their condition.) Contrary to standard procedures, Nyamhuka and Sibanda were returned to the police station after their court appearance on Saturday and forced to sign a statement without their lawyers present. Manda said that police held a gun to Nyamhuka's head to force him to sign.

¶4. (C) Manda said that police had pressed Nyamhuka and Sibanda to implicate former-MDC MP Roy Bennett in the alleged assassination plot. Bennett's supposed role has received intense coverage in the state media, with the Sunday Mirror quoting a source that "a senior MDC official who is a former legislator" planted the seed money in a Mozambique bank for Hitschmann. The media has also portrayed Bennett as evading an intense police search, although Manda noted that the police had yet to officially indicate that Bennett was a suspect. MDC contacts inform us that Bennett) who according to MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa has been nominated unopposed as party treasurer to be formally elected at the Congress this weekend - is still free. The Australian Charge told the CDA today that Bennett has left the country.

Comment

¶5. (C) The GOZ's charges do not add up. The weapons cache consists of a dozen or so hunting rifles and assorted ammunition and radio equipment) hardly the stuff of a coup attempt. The more likely explanation is that the weapons are

connected to Hitschmann,s work as a firearms dealer. Moreover, the accounts we have heard about Hitschmann suggest that he is an unlikely participant in such a conspiracy, let alone an organizer. Furthermore, spilling oil on the road to cause an accident is more the brainchild of Willie-Coyote than would-be coup plotters, even those as half-baked as Hitschmann. All evidence at this point would suggest that the GOZ is deliberately, and unfortunately successfully, using this incident to undermine the MDC ahead of its Congress on Friday, in which Bennett was to have played an instrumental role.
SCHULTZ